

Secrets of Life

When at the Chabad in Haverford for the festive holiday of Sukkot and Simchat Torah, the Rabbi, just a little bit beyond utter youthfulness himself, repeatedly referred to me as the “elder statesman” and “senior.” As my wife whispered to my daughter, I was about ready to rip his head off since, in my family, admitting to age was a grievous sin. We never knew for sure my mother’s age. She straight-facedly lied about it. She told us she was born in 1920, but after her death, the paperwork we came up with showed her date of birth much closer to 1915. Who knows? She was born at home and spent the early years of her life until teenagehood living on a dairy farm in upstate New York. Mom always dyed her hair and looked impeccable until the day she died in February of 2018.

After a while, at the Chabad over Simcha Torah, it sunk in that I am in fact a senior and that maybe I have something to contribute to our youth. The Rabbi would, every once in a while, call upon me to say or do something. Rabbi Eli, as the students call him, loves the role of teacher, friend and mentor to the students. So sure, I am a lawyer and a bigmouth and I am happy to help the Rabbi in any way that I can. The Gabbai, I will never be since there are at least one or two competent students to do that, but the “elder statesman,” with a few words of encouragement, is a more comfortable role for me.

Recently, one of the students asked me “the secret to life.” Obviously, he was being sarcastic, quaint, and just a bit condescending. No matter; I was ready with an answer anyway.

Here is what I had to say to this very bright, energetic, and at times even eloquent college students at Haverford, Swarthmore and Bryn Mawr: The secrets of life are expressed throughout our literature. Ben Zoma’s admonition that he who respects others is respected, that one is wise through learning from all people, and that the strong person controls himself (“better to be slow to anger than to conquer a city”). And finally, who is rich? One who is satisfied with his lot. There is lots of good stuff out there for those who are interested in the secret of life, but my admonitions are borne of my own personal experience and observation, just as I am sure Ben Zoma’s were. So, here they are.

1. Optimism comes from G-d. Always be optimistic. Simchat Torah is a holiday not mentioned either in the Bible or the Talmud. It came about starting in the 5th Century, when the Jews had it bad. The Temple was destroyed, the sacrificial system had come to an end and the people were scattered. The Romans had killed hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Jews, and the Christian church was following in the same path. Yet, even though the religion should have disappeared at that time, the Rabbis and the people spontaneously created the most festive days of the year

based upon the completion of the cyclical reading of the Torah. The Torah was all the children of Israel had left. They were optimistic when no sane person would have been.

2. Your body is your temple, my uncle used to say. The sages likewise taught the necessity of taking care of one's body in order to serve G-d and one's self, not to mention family and friends. Eat well, exercise, and keep bad stuff out. It is simple, but you cannot accomplish much without taking care of your body.
3. Bring your parents up well. This is what young people were most interested in. How does a young person, or someone of any age for that matter, bring up their parents? The answer is deceptively simple. People learn the most from what I like to call "parroting" behavior. Whether it be modern culture or family relationships, there is an imitation factor in all human interaction. At any age, a parent will look lovingly and approvingly upon a child who sets a good example. Old dogs can learn new tricks, or they can at least modify some of their old tricks. If you want your parents, I told the college students, to be better listeners, more understanding and less hypocritical, then clean up your own act. Do what is necessary to set a good example and your parents will follow; really, they will.

In reality, everyone finds their own secret to life if they are seekers and if they care to better themselves in the world. There are tons of adages, messages and religious principles that attempt to capture the secret of life. A life well lived encourages each person to find their own secret of life.

Millennials are often criticized as lazy, unengaged, and generally thoughtless. Recently, I heard a critique of modern music as being without substance and lacking any complexity such as the fabulous classic, America's *A Horse With No Name*. Or how about Richard Harris's *MacArthur Park*: "Someone left the cake out in the rain, I don't think that I can take it, 'cause it took so long to bake it, and I'll never have that recipe again"? So much for the old music being better than the current nonsensical themes.

I was talking to a friend the other day, who told me that no political time has been worse than the age of Trump. I reminded him that he was old enough to live through Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, who were total anathemas to the liberals of the time. My buddies were looking for homes in Canada but somehow managed to stay in the United States, make money, and vote both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama into power.

It is a great honor to engage with young people, some of whom are on a search and others who, in spite of their efforts to the contrary, will simply grow up and old. What we can and should do is follow the dictates of *Pirkei Avot*, one of the marvelous books in the Talmud, which teaches us to have contempt for no one and not to be dismissive of other ideas. Perhaps my Dad put it the best when he said: "Remember, we are all G-d's children, even if some of those kids behave really badly sometimes." The best part

about the secret of life is the search for those secrets. The more we look, the more we benefit from the search.

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